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# Rocking Beijing

July 23, 2008 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [2 comments](#)

By Eric Setzekorn

Like almost every aspect of Beijing life in the past five years, the live music scene has undergone rapid but uneven development. Beijing has always prided itself on the gritty originality of its live music compared to the dominance of cover bands in Shanghai or the saccharine Canto-pop of Hong Kong. The recent opening of new, modern venues on both sides of the city has allowed dozens of new bands and a newly affluent urban youth to establish a flourishing but still shallow live music scene.

For live music, particularly rock and hip hop music, the Olympics are bringing challenges such as new rules and regulations but could allow some bands to develop a global fan base which remains a central difficulty for Chinese groups. A less immediate and more difficult issue will be resolving the internal contradictions between Chinese rock and its relation to Chinese society. The elephant in the room of any discussion of China's music scene is how to rectify the anti-authoritarian values which infuse rock music and even more so punk and hip-hop with the boundaries of the Chinese political system. At present the young, often highly nationalistic youth seem to be pulling in the same direction as the



government, which comes as a shock to many foreign visitors and seems to betray the core anti-establishment values of rock, punk and hip-hop. However, the post-1989 cultural détente in which musicians stayed away from politics may be eroding.

Beijing has slowly struggled to rebuild its music scene after rock music had been identified by the government as a "bad element" following the events of 1989. The introduction of punk and alternative rock sounds from groups like Nirvana and Sonic Youth in the 1990s helped influence new groups like the all-girl band Hang on the Box, which was the first Chinese band on the cover of *Newsweek Asia*, and whose music marked a sharp change from the Bruce Springsteen-esque Cui Jian types of the 1980s.

However, the still small underground rock scene suffered from a lack of funding and limited exposure



that kept most groups at a non-professional level. It has only been in the past few years that bands have been able to perform in purpose-built, high quality venues in front of large crowds. The opening of D-22 in 2005 by American professor Michael Pettis was a turning point and helped revitalized the Haidian university district's languishing nightlife and live music scene. Across town in business-oriented Chaoyang, several venues with a capacity of up to 2,000 opened their doors to both local and foreign groups.

One of the most interesting clubs is the centrally located "Mao Live House" near the Bell and Drum tower, north of the Forbidden City. A converted movie theater, it has space for up to 400 and, with backing by the Japanese "Bad News" record label, installed high quality lighting and sound equipment—surely a first for Beijing. Its snarky logo features only the hairline of Mao circa 1970 in black set against a white backdrop. Mao also shows various local underground films during set breaks. A recent five-minute film showcased a young film student doing tai-chi while standing on an on-ramp to the second ring road. Throughout the five minutes the incredibly brave/foolish filmmaker was not questioned or stopped by any passerby or even the police but his attached microphone recorded a constant stream of profanities from drivers.

It would be easy to assume that venues like "Mao" possess and cultivate the anti-establishment ethos that permeates many rock, punk or hip-hop clubs in the U.S. or Europe, but the non-political tone of the majority of musicians and fans limits many of the protest aspects of rock music. The majority of



live music fans are under thirty, urban, middle class, often have a university education, and have benefited greatly under the current political system. For a variety of reasons—strong economic growth, a tightly controlled education system, and no memory of 1989—the younger generation is generally optimistic and supportive of current policies, which means bands that inject politics into their music risk isolating themselves. In addition, some Chinese musicians are highly sensitive to criticism they are “acting like foreigners” by playing rock or punk music. At a recent show at D-22, a lead singer prefaced his set by appealing to the audience to remember that even though he wore western style clothing and his band used western style guitars and drums they remained wholly Chinese in spirit.

More than any other event, the [now infamous Bjork concert](#) in Shanghai on March 4th, where the Icelandic singer closed her song “Declare Independence” by shouting “Tibet,” has deeply affected Beijing’s music scene prior to the Olympic games. For fear of other political disturbances by foreign acts, the always-cautious Beijing city government postponed until October the widely anticipated annual Midi rock music festival that normally draws over 10,000 rock fans.

There is also a fear of violence by Chinese fans directed towards any band that might make a political statement about Tibet or Darfur. Even without provocation, Chinese fans can be highly



temperamental; in 2003 and 2005, nationalistic young Chinese pelted Japanese bands with beer bottles during the music festival. The Tibet protests this spring have also encouraged nationalistic tendencies and a more belligerent attitude among many young Chinese, musicians included. In one of the small CD stores catering to underground and local

rock groups, one of the most prominent DVDs is a brutally graphic account of the Lhasa riots showing charred bodies and graphic violence captured by security cameras. The video's narration continuously denounces the rioters as traitors who serve the Dalai Lama and his foreign sponsors and stresses the need for firm action to regain control. Adjacent to this grisly and apparently popular documentary, shop workers sat on the floor with guitars strumming along to a Nirvana Unplugged CD.

However, not all musicians are in step with the party line and many do succeed in hiding political and social criticisms in their lyrics. The wildly popular Carsick Cars song "Zhongnanhai" has a chorus of,

"Zhongnanhai, Zhongnanhai, if you smoke just smoke Zhongnanhai  
Zhongnanhai, Zhongnanhai, can't live without Zhongnanhai,  
Zhongnanhai, Zhongnanhai, who the fuck smoked my Zhongnanhai?"

The subtlety of the double meaning (Zhongnanhai is both a brand of cheap cigarettes and the senior government housing area adjacent the Forbidden City) no doubt overshoots many listeners, but vagueness is necessary when every recorded lyric must be vetted by the Ministry of Culture. In a [recent Time Magazine article](#) that listed [Beijing band PK14](#) as one of its five bands to watch in 2008, lead singer Yang Haisong listed American protest singers Woody Guthrie, Phil O



chs and Bob Dylan as his inspirations. While not every band will go to the extreme of the hip-hop group Pan-Gu, which is currently in exile in Sweden due to their anti-party message, the growing cross-pollination of foreign and Chinese bands could possibly increase the desire for musicians to become more vocal social critics.

To eliminate the possibility of disruptions during the Olympic Games, the Ministry of Culture has issued guidelines stating that acts that "undermine national unity, endanger state security, stir up ethnic hatred, violate religious policy and ethnic customs, publicize pornography and superstition will be barred," with offenders likely being blacklisted but not arrested. Like many other socially undesirable facilities such as Beijing's [infamous Maggie's bar](#), police have mostly used indirect tactics to halt activity. At present D-22 is closed due to "licensing issues" but hopes to re-open before the games. Other clubs have had problems getting visas for foreign groups to enter China. While the authorities will likely get their wish and eliminate any potential trouble spots during the games, the growth of live music in Beijing coupled with a more outspoken artistic community could be a potential source of future conflict and friction.

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**Tags:** [Beijing](#), [Chinese music](#), [hip-hop](#), [Olympics](#)